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WILLIAM MAXWELL

A Virginian of Ante-Bellum Days

By
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Norfolk, Va.

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WILLIAM MAXWELL

By the Rev. W. H. T. Squires, D. D.
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His brilliant life spanned that long and interesting period which opened at the Revolution and closed at the Civil War. He was born in Norfolk, Va. (1784), less than three months after General Washington had delivered his farewell address to the army. He died near Williamsburg (1857) two months before Chief Justice Taney had rendered the Dred Scott decision. These were the days of intellectual giants in Church and State and Maxwell was a king among them. It is to question whether the Virginia of his time produced a more cultured, gifted and versatile son than he.

His name and fame have become obscured. Had Maxwell devoted his talents to politics as he did to law, literature and education, his fame would be secure. It must be remembered that he passed away just before the long and heart-breaking series of catastrophies that befell in the terrible years of blood, glory, defeat and humiliation (1861-75). There was but little chance for kindly courtesies to the memory of departed benefactors. Yet, even so, this does not wholly excuse, if it does in part explain, the seeming neglect of those for whom he labored more directly. His life is a peculiar ornament and his memory should remain the care of the Presbyterians of this state, the college of Hampden-Sidney and the city of Norfolk.

The family was Scotch, as the name indicates. But his father, James Maxwell, was loyal to this, his adopted country, and served faithfully in the infant navy of Virginia. So efficient was Captain Maxwell that he was made "general superintendent" of the little Virginia fleet. In November, 1781, he was put in command of the "Covenant," a man-of-man of considerable displacement.

Like others of his blood, James Maxwell knew how to earn a dollar and how to keep it. At his death in 1795 he left a handsome estate to his children.

William graduated from Yale at the age of eighteen. He was a favorite pupil of Rev. Timothy Dwight, who had a marked influence on his life. His degree well won, Maxwell returned to Virginia and studied law in Richmond. He was admitted to the Norfolk bar when twenty-four years of age (1808). The proverbial years of starvation and neglect that test the courage of those who covet legal honors were not the portion of William Maxwell. He was promptly retained in a case of importance, "Wilson and Cunningham vs. the Marine Insurance Company of Norfolk." His brilliant pleading in this his maiden appearance secured for him instant recognition as the leading attorney of the local bar, despite his youth and inexperience. Nor did the passing years dim his prestine renown. The laurels gathered by his youthful efforts never faded. Each year almost without exception brought to Maxwell some new legal triumph.

As an Orator.

His reputation spread through state and nation. Many well qualified to judge counted him the most eloquent speaker in America. And it is to remember that America was full of men powerful on the hustings. The art of public speaking was developed in the post-Revolutionary era as it had not been developed before or since. Patrick Henry had passed, but his influence was still potent. John Randolph, of Roanoke, was Maxwell's senior by only eleven years. Yet Dr. James W. Alexander declared in 1827 that Maxwell was "the very best orator I know anywhere." And Hugh Blair Grigsby, who had abundant opportunities to hear and to judge the greatest speakers in the whole country, says of him, "His wit was as keen as the scimitar of Saladin, and his humor, which he put forth at will, was irresistible. As an orator he stood in his day and generation without an equal. I have heard many of the most

eloquent men who from the date of the Virginia Convention of 1776 to the middle of the present century were classed among our greatest speakers, and, looking to the sphere he chose, I do not hesitate to declare that in my opinion Maxwell surpassed them all."

Maxwell's gift of expression was remarkable, for all his speeches were delivered extemporaneously. He never wrote a speech unless after delivery. His "readiness was uncommon; if knocked up at midnight he would make a finer speech than any one else could have done after deliberate preparation." But such a gift was not the readiness of a superficial talker. He was deeply read in the English classics and had cultivated a splendid native endowment with painstaking self-discipline.

To quote Grigsby again, "He is the only eminent man I have ever known to appear before such a body as the Phi Beta Kappa Society of Yale on one of their formal anniversaries without a single line of written preparation. Yet Maxwell succeeded. When a committee of the society reported its thanks and asked him for a copy of the speech for publication, they could hardly believe their ears when told that the speech was entirely extemporaneous."

As a Poet.

Maxwell's success in literary effort did not approach his fame as an orator. Had he written more his fame would have rested on a more substantial foundation. It was typical of the Virginians of ante-bellum days that they demanded men who could speak and neglected men who could write. Maxwell published a modest volume of "Poems," dedicated to Rev. Dr. Timothy Dwight, of Yale, dated "Norfolk, Va., May 1, 1812."

The verse is of extraordinary merit. The style is classic in the strictest sense. Every line is carefully wrought and bears the marks of that painstaking labor without which perfection is impossible. If Mxawell's extemporaneous speeches were as aptly expressed and as elegantly constructed as his poems one can understand the charm of his delighted auditors.

The most pretentious poem is "Ariadne and Theseus," classic in theme and style. One of Maxwell's finest bits of verse was done as an eulogy to his late pastor, Rev. Benjamin Porter Grigsby. Aside from its poetic value these lines are deeply interesting to the student of Presbyterian history in Virginia.

The Presbyterian Church of the Tidewater section has a long history, most of which is now hopelessly lost. The Tidewater churches sprang from a root entirely different from the churches up-state. The father, not the founder, of Norfolk Presbyterianism was Rev. Benjamin Porter Grigsby. The Presbytery of Hanover in 1792 licensed two brilliant young men and sent them to itinerate in Eastern Virginia as missionaries. One was Archibald Alexander and the other young Grigsby. They rode together from the Valley to Petersburg. When they parted Alexander traveled south and west and Grigsby set forth to Norfolk, "with his sole personal possessions in a pair of saddle bags." He did the work of an evangelist well—we know of none who did it better. He gathered the Presbyterians of the borough, and though he did not remain long, he made a lasting impression upon them. Among his scattered flock the Maxwells must have been influential, perhaps the most prominent family, with whom he had to do. William was then a lad of eight. Grigsby did not remain, but soon settled as pastor of the churches at Lewisburg and Union, now West Virginia.

In 1801 the Presbyterians of Norfolk made the brilliant young minister a "call." He accepted it and remained in the growing town for nine fruitful and blessed years of devoted service. No reason is vouchsafed us for Mr. Grigsby's leaving so delightful a pastorate for one so difficult. No doubt it was the appeal of the growing and godless town with its great future that brought the consecrated young clergyman from the bluegrass valleys of the west. At the opening of the Revolution Norfolk was the largest city in the state. On the first day of January, 1776, at three in the morning, Lord Dunmore fired the town. He added to his infamy by shelling the stricken inhabitants, many of them Tories, as they fled for refuge to

the country districts carrying with them such effects as they might. The fire burned three days, unhindered, and the prosperous city was a smoking ruin with not a single inhabitant!

When the piping times of peace came again, Norfolk slowly and painfully rose from the ashes. At the time of Mr. Grigsby's missionary visit there were about 3,000 people, just half the population before Dunmore's cruel conflagration. But the closing days of the century were marked by continued growth and great prosperity. In 1799 Norfolk counted 900 homes, 4,500 people, on her marish peninsula. In 1800 the Federal government purchased a large tract of land across the river and began the equipment of the navy yard. This promising development would likely affect a young man anxious to serve his Master to best advantage.

During his ministry a church was erected. It was the only church in town provided with a bell, hence it was known locally, and has come to be known historically as the Bell church. It was a substantial and even an ornate structure, erected in the best residential district. When Grigsby died the membership was only about fifty, but the Bell church provided some 450 sittings. It was by far the largest building in town. The young minister fell in his golden prime; forty years of age. He lies in Trinity church-yard, Portsmouth, under a marble obelisk. His death was a calamity from which our church in Norfolk has never fully recovered.

William Maxwell had begun the practice of law two years before Benjamin Grigsby's death. The brilliant young lawyer's eulogy to his late pastor is a touching tribute, a fair and fragrant wreath of rosemary for remembrance.

"Thy labors, Grigsby, in this world are o'er;
The storm may rage, but thou shalt hear no more.
How bright thy crown, thy robes of honor shine,
And heaven's eternal paradise is thine!
But I, poor pilgrim in this vale of tears,
Tread on through darkness and distressing fears,
This dreary waste, that seems without an end;
More dreary still, since I have lost a friend."

But it is to confess that this popular, successful, wealthy, cultured, honored young man of twenty-nine did not usually regard his life a "dreary waste that seems without an end." Many sprightly verses to Anne show that. They give another glimpse of Maxwell's style and literary method. These verses are the cry of a gallant young lover, exaggerated no doubt for gentle, blue-eyed Anne's sake. We judge that Maxwell did not take his love affairs so seriously as these ardent words imply. It has always been a characteristic of a Virginia gentleman, even the most conscientious Virginia gentleman, that he does not hesitate to tell a lie to, for or about a woman; especially a young, beautiful and lovable woman.

"How many kisses do I ask?
Faith, you set me to my task,
First, sweet Anne, will you tell me,
How many waves are in the sea?
How many stars are in the sky?
How many lovers you make sigh?
How many sands are on the shore?
—I shall want just one kiss more."

We have no idea who sweet Anne was, but if she was as bewitching as William describes her she was a queen indeed!

The Rose Bud.

"See this opening rose-bud, Anne,
Gay with morning dew,
Trembling at the eye of man,
Trembling, blushing, too
'Tis, thy sweetest self, to see.
Beauty's bud thou art.
It shall flourish here, like thee,
O'er this beating heart."

A manly man loves with strength, passion and masterful purpose. These little poems came from the pen of a man who knew how to love; and to love hard. Perhaps he loved too passionately for his own good. He did not marry gentle, blue-eyed Anne. Whomsoever she may have wedded, we doubt that

she did better. Maxwell lived for many years a celibate. Whether he lived to sigh for Anne, while Anne loved another man, we cannot say.

"Those eyes are so witchingly blue,
Those cheeks are so witchingly red,
I'm sure you can never be true,
And why should I wish to be dead?
So goodbye, dear Anne, I must go;
Ah, yes, we must part! We must part!
That eye will kill some one, I know,
But I must take care of my heart."

Maxwell's most popular poems were called forth by the second war with Great Britain. The Volunteer's Adieu is especially fine; and then, too, it has local flavor. Richmond troops were rushed to Norfolk to protect the twin cities on Elizabeth river, and the navy yard, which the British were especially anxious to capture or destroy. The Richmond lads reassured their tearful sweethearts in these words:

"Ye pretty girls who droop and sigh
To bid your lads adieu;
Come, kiss us now before we die,
We go to fight for you.

If British lads should come again,
Their folly they may rue;
They'll find what 'tis to handle men,
Who fight to merit you.

The rogues may try their warlike arts,
What mischief can they do?
Their bayonets cannot reach the hearts,
We've left at home with you.

There is more danger in your charms
Than swords and cannon, too.
We can defy a world at arms,
When we're at peace with you."

One lays the poems down with a sigh: and recalls the pessimist's motto, "Sic transit gloria mundi." So completely have

book and author been forgotten that neither finds a place in any collection of Virginia or Southern literature. Maxwell deserves better at the hands of posterity than he has received. The volume of poems, so narrow that one may slip it into his vest pocket, so thin that it seems impossible for 144 pages to find space therein, so crisp and yellow with the corroding touch of a century and more, deserves a better fate than oblivion. Here are true and worthy poems. Here is real literature with the touch of a genuine artist. We cannot grow so enthusiastic as Dr. Conrad Speece, a giant of tongue and pen in his day, when in 1818 he declared, "With this book in my hand I will no more suffer the assertion to pass in silence that Virginia has not yet produced a poet worthy of the title." That praise is a bit too fulsome, especially as Maxwell did not continue to cultivate the Muses. A second edition was brought out in Baltimore in 1816, but his talent was henceforth unused. We wonder if gentle Anne was to blame?

Maxwell's poems should by all means be republished; a memoir of his life and a few editorial notes added to explain the forgotten items of local history. Such a book would make a valuable re-contribution to the literature of our state and country.

As a Man of Letters.

The poetic gift was lodged with him useless, but Maxwell did not cease to write. In 1816 he published another book, "Letters from Virginia," translated from the French. The "letters" are anonymous, but are ordinarily attributed to Maxwell. We confess never to have seen a copy of this book.

In 1827 Maxwell's literary ability was recognized in New York. He was elected an editor of the Journal of Commerce. The position did not require him to leave his home. Except for the years at Yale, Maxwell never lived without the limits of this state.

As a Citizen.

The Marquis de la Fayette, in his well remembered tour of this country, reached Norfolk with his son, George Washing-

ton. He was met at the wharf by a small committee, one of whom was William Maxwell. The Mayor rode at the head of the procession, the children strewed the streets with a carpet of flowers, and the appreciative people did their utmost to express their appreciation of the great French hero of the Revolution. The Marquis was made comfortable at "Mrs. Hansford's boarding house," as there was no hotel in the town.

Maxwell's abiding interest in general culture and his concern for his native city was further shown when (1828) he presented to the borough of Norfolk a lyceum for lectures and scientific experiments. Eleven years later the building was purchased by the Odd Fellows for $2,000.

Although Maxwell had no political ambitions, the first popular election to the House of Delegates after the proclamation of the "new" Constitution (of 1829) sent Maxwell to Richmond. He served one term (1830-32) and was then promoted to the Senate, in which he was an influential member for three terms (1832-38).

As a Churchman.

When death claimed Dr. John Holt Rice (1831), Maxwell's oration to his memory, delivered before the Literary and Philosophical Society of Hampden-Sidney College (September 27, 1832), was one of the great efforts of his life, and one of the noteworthy addresses of contemporary Virginia. Dr. Rice and Senator Maxwell had been friends for many years. Maxwell was a man of intense loyalty to his friends, as his eulogy to Grigsby and the dedication of his poems to Dwight attest.

After the death of Benjamin P. Grigsby the vacant pulpit of the Bell church had not been promptly filled. The organization was after the Presbyterian form, but the congregation was independent, holding much the same relation to the Presbyterians upstate that the "Independent" Church of Savannah holds to the Synod of Georgia. There had been two ruling elders, but the minutes of the session are now lost. Rev. John Holt Rice, then a pastor in Richmond, visited the Bell church from time to time. He was the nearest pastor to the pastor-

less flock in Norfolk. Hugh Blair Grigsby was only four years old when his father died. The little lad continued to reside in Norfolk with his widowed mother. When he was a lad of eight the Bell church decided to unite with Hanover Presbytery. Dr. Rice came down to preach and to preside upon this occasion (April 14, 1814). Speaking at Hampden-Sidney College in 1776, Grigsby said of that interesting and historic occasion: "Sixty-two years ago in Norfolk, when John Holt Rice was at the age of thirty-five, I saw him for the first time. and I remember the crowds that filled the church and the private dwellings in which he preached."

It is not to be assumed that this was Dr. Rice's first visit to Norfolk. The Bell church was probably brought into the proper relation to presbytery by this great ecclesiastical statesman. On this same occasion the Bell church was reorganized. The two original elders were re-elected and William Maxwell added as the third member of Session. He was also ordained (as we surmise) by Dr. Rice.

The new Session met promptly (April 23, 1814) and Maxwell prepared a petition to Hanover Presbytery, which met in Petersburg May 7th, asking for the ordination of a Mr. Paxton, of Lexington Presbytery, and that he be allowed to serve the church for a time before his installation as pastor. We further surmise that the hand of Dr. Rice may be traced in this arrangement. It was inevitable that two such brilliant and congenial men as Maxwell and Rice should be mutually attracted. The friendship begun at this time ripened to a devotion that was cemented with the confidence and esteem of passing years.

Dr. Rice moved to Hampden-Sidney in 1823, and with such other choice spirits as Jonathan P. Cushing, the successful president of the college, and Dr. James Marsh, also of the "Hill," formed the Literary and Philosophical Society. The first "annual address" was delivered by Dr. Rice himself. The society had the fluctuations of interest that usually mark such organizations, but, to quote Dr. A. J. Morrison, "the grand anniversary meeting in September was never neglected. It

was then that some gentleman from a distance, eminent for literary and professional attainments, would occupy the stage."

The third annual address was delivered by Dr. Rice's long time friend from Norfolk, William Maxwell. He discussed the vexed problem of education in this state. His address was, of course, extemporaneous. When written, later, and printed it covered fifty-two large pages. We regret to say that a copy of this great speech is not to be found in the library at Hampden-Sidney, though it may be found in the library at Yale. How careless Virginians are of their literature, of their history and of the biographies of their great leaders!

When Rice passed it was both natural and appropriate that Senator Maxwell should be called to the "Hill" to deliver an oration to his memory. When the oration was printed it covered some thirty-three pages.

A few years later Senator Mawell brought out a memoir of Dr. Rice (Philadelphia, 1835). It is illustrated with an excellent portrait of Rice, and contains 412 pages. It is one of the classics of Virginia biography, and a most valuable and trustworthy authority on Presbyterian history. It is today the best known literary work of William Maxwell.

The following year (1836) the Board of Trustees of the college conferred upon the author the scholarly and well merited degree of LL. D. This rare degree had been conferred only twice previously in more than sixty years. In 1825 the college conferred the honor upon United States Senator Benj. Watkins Leigh, and in 1826 upon Chapman Johnson, rector of the newly established University of Virginia. Dr. Maxwell was at the same time elected to a place upon the Board.

As an Educator.

Dark days were now upon the threshold for this princely man. His patrimony, to which he had added large earnings and which was largely invested in Norfolk real estate, was swept away in an acute financial crisis. His last years were spent in comparatively meagre circumstances.

Vicissitudes come to institutions of learning, even as they come to individuals. Under Cushing Hampden-Sidney enjoyed a very successful era, perhaps the most successful in its long and splendid history. Dr. Carroll succeeded Cushing. His administration was brief and troubled (1835-38). All eyes now turned to Dr. Maxwell. He was elected and served the college for six years (1838-44). Had it not been for the distressing Old School—New School schism that rent the Presbyterian Church from end to end, and absorbed all the interest and exhausted all the energies of clergy and laity, we make bold to say that Maxwell's administration would have been even more successful than that of Jonathan P. Cushing.

Hampden-Sidney is now such a beautiful spot, with its magnificent trees of a century's growth, with its wide spreading lawns and ivy covored walls, that we cannot realize how unsightly it was in 1836. Robert L. Dabney wrote his sister: "This place is not very remarkable for anything at all except poverty, for the college stands in the middle of an old field full of gullies and weeds, and the cows of the neighborhood come up to the very windows with their bells making such a noise that I cannot study. The college is a great brick building, four stories high. It has forty-eight rooms, besides the public halls, making fifty-three in all. The rooms are large enough to accommodate three persons each."

But the college did exert a charm even upon the very critical and candid young man. The next year he writes of "these dreary walls": "Although all the external appearances are uncomfortable and repelling, few persons ever come here without regretting their departure." President Maxwell went to work with characteristic energy to improve the appearance of things. He put the buildings in thorough repair and made the campus attractive by planting fruit and forest trees, laying out pleasure walks and doing all in his power to beautify the college, benefit the students, and render them comfortable and happy. His ideal for the college, he said, was a place where pure morals and sound learning may be taught.

The president's salary was $1,400, a very modest sum even

for that day of simple living, and that place of quiet and classic retirement. The vested funds amounted to $40,000, which was not bad for a small college in rural Virginia. The need for greater financial resources was acute; "to establish the college upon a sure and permanent basis for the benefit of the present age and of all posterity." Maxwell's plan was to solicit $20,000 from the churches of East and West Hanover Presbyteries. It does seem that this reasonable sum might have been secured. We do not know how successful the effort was, but we judge that the response from the churches was not liberal. In 1841 the Board unanimously adopted a resolution to the effect that the college needed the cordial support of all its friends. It needed patronage and funds. The resolution reads: "The institution was originally founded within the bounds of the Presbytery of Hanover under the auspices of said Presbytery, and was at first, and has ever since been, mainly supported by the clergy and laity of the Presbyterian Church. Resolved, that the Presbyterians of East and West Hanover be and hereby are solemnly requested to recognize the college as being under the immediate patronage of their bodies in such a manner as they should think most proper."

President Maxwell reported to the Board the following year that the resolutions were received by the Presbyteries "with great favor." "Resolutions were adopted by the Presbyteries considered by the Board as evidence of perpetual union between the college and their bodies."

The faculty during Dr. Maxwell's first year consisted of only three professors beside the president. But one of the three was John W. Draper, who at this time and probably in his laboratory at Hampden-Sidney made the first photograph from life. Another member of the faculty was also from Norfolk, Francis H. Smith. He had just graduated from West Point. This young man had the vision of a West Point for the South. This institution he wished to establish at Hampden-Sidney, or, to be more accurate, he wished to make the classical college over on military lines. He soon moved to Lexington and became the founder and for half a century the su-

perintendent of the Virginia Military Institute. As this school soon graduated Stonewall Jackson and other such leaders, the young professor's dream was more splendidly realized that the most optomistic could have hoped.

The young men that Maxwell sent forth from the college measured up well with his renowned faculty. There were Moses D. Hoge, whose fame as an orator approached Maxwell's; Professor Charles S. Venable, of the University of Virginia; United States Senator Anthony M. Branch, of Texas, and many others less distinguished. There were such officers in the Confederate army as Colonels Harrison Robertson, John T. Thornton, Parke Poindexter and C. L. Arbuckle; such successful editors as W. C. Carrington, of the Richmond "Times," and the veteran W. T. Richardson, of the "Central Presbyterian"; such physicians and surgeons as James T. Spencer, of Farmville; Robert B. Tunstall, of Norfolk, and Paul S. Carrington, of Newport, Ky.; such wealthy business men as Captain Samuel Woodson Venable and Robert Dunn, of Petersburg; such educators and writers as Clement R. Vaughan, W. W. Reed and Judge W. P. Dabney; such eminent jurists as Judges George W. Shelton, of Mississippi; F. P. Wood, of Texas; Wood Bouldin, of the Virginia Court of Appeals, and Edward A. Palmer, of Texas.

President Maxwell had never married. He now claimed as his bride a sister of Colonel Harrison Robertson, of Charlottesville, Va.

The duties of his office weighed heavily upon Dr. Maxwell in his declining years. Some members of the Board were not satisfied with the progress of the college. There was insubordination among the students and general unrest.

As an Editor.

Dr. Maxwell removed to Richmond. There he gave instruction in law and became an enthusiastic member of the Virginia Bible Society, and of the Virginia Colonization Society. His last valuable work was as editor of the Virginia Historical Register (1848-53).

The six volumes of this modest magazine are a veritable mine of Virginia history and biography. It was the kind of work the soul of William Maxwell delighted in. Sometimes the choicest fruit is gathered from an old tree. A note is found at the bottom of the last page of the sixth volume. It thanks the members of the Virginia Historical Society for their support, and the subscribers for their "moderate aid" and the correspondents for their contributions to the pages of the magazine. "And, lastly, we now commend our work in its finished form to all that favor of the public which it may honestly and fairly claim."

William Maxwell closed his long and distinguished career at the home of Littleton T. Waller, near Williamsburg, January 10, 1857. The storms that swept over the country in January have never been forgotten. So severe was the weather that it was not possible to have the funeral of Dr. Maxwell for many days. His old friend and pupil, Moses D. Hoge, went down from Richmond to conduct the funeral. At the meeting of the Virginia Historical Society for March, Dr. Hoge described the obsequies and delivered an eloquent eulogy to Maxwell's memory.

The benign influence of Maxwell still abides, especially his influence as president of Hampden-Sidney College. The young men he trained have left their impress upon the characters of others in all parts of Virginia and the regions beyond.

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